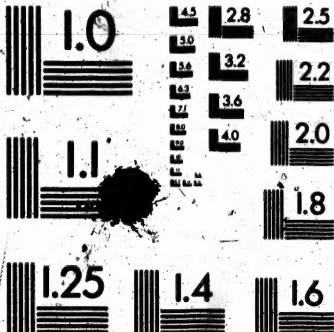


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“THE LIVING WORD.”

A SPEECH

DELIVERED AT THE ANNIVERSARY

OF THE

MONTREAL

Auxiliary Bible Society,

BY

J. MONRÔ GIBSON, M.A.

Junior Pastor of Erskine Church.

PRINTED FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION.

MONTREAL:

PRINTED BY JOHN C. BECKET, 84 GREAT SAINT JAMES STREET.

1868.

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A request to *publish* this speech was declined, on the ground that there is nothing in it of any permanent value ; but the request being repeated, it is now *printed for private circulation* in order to meet the wishes of personal friends,

J. M. G.

"THE LIVING WORD."

Mr. PRESIDENT,—I consider it an honour to move the adoption of such a Report as that to which we have listened—so satisfactory is it, so clear and vigorous, so full of encouragement, and so suggestive of grateful acknowledgments to the God of the Bible, who has counted his servants worthy to serve him during the past year with so much success in so glorious a cause. * * * *

Allusion has been made in the Report to the sad loss this Society has sustained during the past year in the decease of Mr. John Greenshields; and I am sure that we cannot elect the new Committee, whose names I have the honour to submit to you, without a feeling of sadness, so far at least as we are concerned, that God has been pleased to remove that name from the roll of this auxiliary, and from many a similar roll of service and of honour, that he might inscribe it on a roll, whence it shall never be erased, even among the ever increasing company of those who "rest from their labours, while their works do follow them." "All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of men as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away":—such is the sad reflection which a change like this awakens in the mind; but side by side with it there comes by force of contrast another, (for to every note

of sadness in the providence of God there is a counter tone of gladness), "the grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away : *but the word of the Lord endureth for ever.*" How encouraging it is to think that though one by one the workers fall away and wither like the grass, the work continues and progresses still—though the lovers and friends of the blessed Word and its circulation must be put far from us and removed into darkness, yet the Word itself is never darkened and never dies—" *It liveth and abideth forever.*" It is a pure river of the water of life, proceeding out of the throne of God, and of the Lamb, and flowing down through the fields of time, the streams thereof making glad the wilderness of this world, and making many a desert to blossom as the rose—and in name of this river as of its types in nature it may be said : "men may come and men may go, but I go on for ever."

This thought of the stability, or rather the changeless progress of the Word of God is one which is very familiar to our minds. But it is none the less wonderful on this account or less worthy of our attentive consideration. Let us dwell on it for a short time.

Think, first, of the simple fact of the preservation of the Bible and its safe transmission to us from the earliest times. At first sight this does not strike us of the 19th century as anything very remarkable; for now copies of the Bible are so multiplied throughout the world, and the spirit and even the letter of the Scriptures have been so transfused

throughout the literature of all civilized nations, that the greatest potentate on earth, or all its potentates combined, might as well try to blot the sun out of the heavens, as to extinguish that Word which "is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path."

But it was very different in ancient times. The last book of the Bible was written nearly 1300 years and the first book of the Bible nearly 3000 years before the invention of printing. And when you think how during these many centuries horde after horde of heathen barbarians swept like a destroying blight over the lands where the Scriptures had a home;—when you think that all the great libraries of the ancient world, those, for example, at Alexandria, Constantinople, Athens and Rome, were destroyed by fire;—when you think that two systematic attempts were made by tyrant kings to exterminate the Scriptures by burning every copy in existence: the one by Antiochus Epiphanes of Syria, after the Canon of the Old Testament was complete, and the other by Diocletian, Emperor of Rome, after the entire Scriptures of both the Old and New Testaments were in the hands of the faithful few who then constituted the Christian Church—when you think of all these and many other dangers against which the precious Word had to be guarded, you see that it is indeed a wonderful thing that these Scriptures have been preserved and handed down to us in their integrity. Antiochus Epiphanes and Diocletian have long ago gone down to dishonoured graves, and the dust of those Barbarian hordes now mingles with the common clay and with the embers

of the destroying fires they kindled; but the Word which they sought vainly to destroy, endureth still and shall endure forever. And not only has it survived the shocks of time and change, of tyranny and anarchy, of rapine and war, (which can be said of other old books, though of none so old, and none so hated as the Bible); but it has come down to us, (to use the words of Isaac Taylor, which he substantiates in his "History of the Transmission of Ancient Books to Modern Times,") "with an evidence of its genuineness and integrity, tenfold more various, copious and conclusive than can be adduced in support of any other ancient writing." Thus has God owned and honoured His own Word, and safely transmitted it to us as a heritage forever, and as a sacred trust to publish it abroad and send it to the ends of the earth.

Think also of the abiding freshness of the Word of God. Who can say the Bible is out of date? Well there are some that do say it, and we ask them: wherein is it out of date? Is it out of date as a book of religion? Is it out of date as a book of Theology, of Human nature, of Ethics, of Salvation? All other books that have been attempted on these subjects, except those which have drawn their inspiration directly or indirectly from the Scriptures, were either out of date when they were first produced, or became outdated in a very few years. What has become of the ethical and religious productions of those that have pursued their investigations, and recorded the results of them without the aid of revelation? Where for example are the moralists and phil-

osophers of Greece and Rome? Their works indeed are on the shelves of every scholar in Christendom. But in what capacity? As authorities? Not at all—only as monuments of genius or chapters of Intellectual History. Who would ever think of giving to the question: "Where withal shall a young man cleanse his way?" an answer like this: "By taking heed thereto according to Aristotle's Nicomachian Ethics?" Yet Aristotle's Nicomachian Ethics is the best work on morals that was ever produced without aid from the Scriptures. Who would ever think of seeking a soul-satisfying solution to the problem, "If a man die shall he live again?" in Plato's Dialogue on the Immortality of the Soul? Is there a single Greek or Roman Classic on the subject of man's condition or future prospects that would be of the slightest use to a soul burdened with sin, and pressed with the weight of that most solemn of all questions: "How shall man be just with God?" They are all out of date—cold monuments of genius, dead relics of antiquity, almost forgotten attempts to sound the mysteries of Life and Death. So much for the fate of Moralists and Religious Philosophers who have written without the aid of revelation.

And now, what of those who have written in opposition to the Word of God? These have been more speedily and more thoroughly outdated than the others. To illustrate this we ask: Where are the authorities of our intelligent sceptical friends of the present day? You will find them all among the writers of the last few years. And

what of all the rest, from Celsus, Porphyry and Julian downwards? All out of date, as these too very soon will be. Where is the sceptical writer of 2000, or 1000, or 500,—aye, or 100 years old by whom the infidels of to day will venture to stand as we stand by Moses and David, by Matthew and Paul? They are all out of date, and their works are to be found, if found at all,* amidst the dusty, decaying, moth-eaten relics of the past, in the British Museum, or on the Antiquarian's bookshelf. But who will venture to predict the time when you will have to go to the British Museum or any other Museum to find a copy of the writings of Moses, or Joshua, or David, or Solomon, or Isaiah, or Daniel, or Matthew, or Luke, or Paul, or John? These authors are all old, but they are always new. Old as they are, their words are weightier and more powerful, more widely read and more confidently appealed to now than at any previous time. The path of the Bible is not like the path of the infidel production, a steep descent to dark oblivion, but like the path of those who are justified by its faith, which "is as the shining light, that shineth more and more unto the perfect day." So much for the abiding freshness of the Bible as a book of religion, as a light to the feet, a lamp to

* A very good illustration of the speedy death and disappearance of infidel publications, is given by Voltaire, who seems quite unaware of the significance of the phenomenon which he registers thus: "Parmi les modernes, Thomas Woolston, docteur de Cambridge, fut le premier, ce me semble, qui soutint effrontément qu'aucun des miracles de Jésus n'avait été réellement opéré. . . . Ses six discours contre les miracles de Jésus-Christ se vendaient publiquement à Londres dans sa propre maison. Il en fit en deux ans, depuis 1737 jusqu'à 1739, trois éditions de vingt mille exemplaires chacune; et il est difficile aujourd'hui d'en trouver chez les libraires."—*Dictionnaire Philosophique, Art. Miracles*. If it was difficult to find one of all these 60,000 copies thirty years after publication, what must have become of the learned work by this time?

the path of man in his journey through life, through death, into eternity.

But some will tell us it is "out of date as a book of science." Now in the first place we have to say that it is not a book of science, and makes no pretensions to be a scientific book. It is a book of salvation—a book for the people, and therefore couched in such language as the people can understand. "But then even a book of salvation coming from God ought not to contradict science." Certainly not—and neither does it. Have not attempts innumerable been made during these last fifty years to prove that Scripture contradicts science; and is the Bible any weaker now, or any more out of date since these assaults commenced? It is stronger than ever, and fresher than ever, and more obviously ahead of the times than ever. It would be altogether out of place within the limits of a short speech, as this must necessarily be, to attempt to enter upon the wide field of the supposed controversy between Scripture and science. But there is one way which occurs to me in which the matter may be put somewhat strikingly before our minds in a very few sentences. It is not generally known by those who are not in the habit of reading old books how very absurd all their scientific references appear to those who read them in after ages. You find the wisest and most learned men writing about such subjects in such a way that school-boys of ten years old will be ready to laugh at their ignorance a century afterwards. Innumerable illustrations of this might be given. To save time I shall just present one, which I think will be

quite sufficient for the purpose. In order to select one I might take you back 1800 years to the time of Matthew, or 3000 years and still be short of the time of Moses; but I shall ask you to go back only the seventh part of the shorter of these periods: a distance of 250 years. I might take some period of comparative obscurity, and some country little known to scientific fame like ancient Judea; but instead of that I shall take the foremost nation in Europe at the very height of her literary glory, viz.: England in the reign of James I, ere yet the glory of the Elizabethan age had begun to fade. I might select an author that made no pretensions to science like most of the writers of Scripture; but I shall choose one who stood perhaps head and shoulders above all his contemporaries as a scientific man, viz.: Lord Bacon; and I shall take the *Novum Organum*, the greatest of his works. Now bear with me while I read you one or two short extracts from this justly celebrated work, and leave you to judge whether the great philosopher of the seventeenth century, or the simple writers of Scripture, so long before his time, are the more accurate, the more rational, or if you will, the more modern in their scientific references. The extracts are made from Wood's version, Bohn's edition, 1858. In the chapter on "citing instances" (at page 519) we read:

"Every tangible body with which we are acquainted contains an invisible and intangible spirit, over which it is drawn and which it seems to clothe. * * * * * The departure or emission of spirit is rendered sensible in the rust of metals, and other putrefactions of a like nature, which stop before they arrive at the rudiments of life. . . . In compact

bodies the spirit does not find pores and passages for its escape and is therefore obliged to force out and drive before it the tangible parts also, which consequently protrude, whence arises rust and the like.

On the contrary, when the spirit is retained, and yet expanded and excited by heat or the like (which happens in solid and tenacious bodies), then the bodies are softened, as in hot iron; or flow, as in metals; or melt, as in gums, wax and the like. The contrary effects of heat therefore (hardening some substances and melting others), are easily reconciled, because the spirit is emitted in the former and agitated or retained in the latter; the latter action is that of heat and the spirit, the former that of the tangible parts themselves, after the spirit's emission."

Again, on the subject of motion, after an enumeration of eighteen kinds of motion, he explains the nineteenth and last, which he calls "the motion of repose, or of abhorrence of motion," thus (p 551) :

"It is by this motion that the earth stands by its own weight, whilst its extremes move towards the middle, and to an imaginary centre, but in order to unite. It is owing to the same tendency that all bodies of considerable density abhor motion, and their only tendency is not to move, which nature they preserve, although excited and urged in a variety of ways to motion. But if they be compelled to move, yet do they always appear anxious to recover their former state and to cease from motion; in which respect they certainly appear active, and attempt it with sufficient swiftness and rapidity, as if fatigued and impatient of delay. We can have only a partial representation of this tendency, because with us every tangible substance is not only not condensed to the utmost, but even some spirit is added, owing to the action and concocting influence of the heavenly bodies."

Again, on the doctrine of harmony, the philosopher warns his readers against harmonies which are so obscure and fanciful as to be unworthy of notice; but recommends that proper attention should be paid to true harmonies, of which he gives the following as a sample, (p. 562) :

"Thus there is a correspondence between sulphur, oil, greasy exhalations, and perhaps the substance of the stars."

One might multiply quotations indefinitely, as thoroughly out of date as these. In fact the whole of the second book is completely out of date. You cannot read a page of it without smiling at the blunders of the great philosopher. So long as he confined himself to abstractions, as he does in his first book, he wrote that which was destined to prove of lasting value, but as soon as he attempted to illustrate from nature he made himself ridiculous to after ages. Now that very old book of which we have been speaking and which lays claim to be the Word of God, abounds in illustrations from nature, and nowhere can you find anything in it that is truly out of date. Take one of the very oldest of the books, and one which abounds more than any other in references to nature, the book of Job, and where can you find a single passage, which, rightly interpreted, is out of date? There are passages which have been looked upon in past times as out of date, but which have proved to be ahead of the times instead of behind them, such as that where God is spoken of as "hanging the earth upon nothing," and where we are told that while "Out of the earth cometh bread, underneath it is turned up (or convulsed) as by fire."

Now the above comparison is instituted not to make you respect Bacon the less, for it is not at all to his discredit that his science of the seventeenth century should be so completely out of date in the nineteenth; but to lead you to see in the fact that the illustrations from nature which abound in the

Bible, are as fresh and accurate and appropriate as ever, an additional evidence that these Scriptures were not, as some would have us believe, the word of men, but are in truth the Word of God.

We have spoken of the preservation of the Bible in its integrity, and of its abiding freshness, as never falling behind the times. But there is more than this—much more. It not only exists and holds its ground. It lives. “It *liveth*” as well as “abideth for ever.” It is “quick, (*i. e.* living) and powerful.” In some old Bible of your great-grandfather, between the leaves which enclose some cherished passage that had often cheered the old man’s heart, there is a little relic of the past. “’Tis but a little faded flower;” but there it is. Its colour is faded; but the form still is there. Crush it; and it will crumble into dust. But leave it there; and your great-grandchild may see it on some future day as you see it now. In the British Museum, where there is such a noble collection of manuscripts and versions of the Bible, you will see in one of its departments the remains of men and women that may have lived before Moses penned the book of Genesis, the form and features still retained, though life has long fled—the ghastly relics of a long past age. In the solid rocks of earth you will find the remains of animals and plants that have endured there, “sealed within the iron hills,” from antiquity so hoar, that Moses is among the moderns by comparison. All these seem to abide, while others of their kind decay; but of none of them can you say that “it *liveth* and *abideth*.” Not like the faded flower,

not like the ghastly mummy, not like the stony "dragons of the prime,"—but like the great Creator of them all, the Word of God "liveth and abideth for ever." The Word of God is not a lifeless statue of the past, like the word of Demosthenes, or of Cicero, whose speeches still may move to admiration, but can no longer stir men up to action as in the days when they were fresh and strong. But the Word of God is just as powerful now as in the days of old—can stir men up to deeds of valour against the great enemy of our heavenly Fatherland, which throw the exploits of even Athenian warriors into shade—can make the soul of the very meanest who receives it, the home of a virtue as far superior to that which Cicero commended, as heaven is higher than earth, or God greater than man. The trophies of that valour and the flowers of that virtue are such as history does not point out, and men of the world can never see. The field on which most of these trophies are erected and where most of these flowers bloom, is the sacred privacy of ten thousand times ten thousand Christian hearts—hearts that can each and all bear witness to the living power of the truth of God, to instruct and to guide, to enlighten and to bless, to comfort and save, to console in trouble, and sustain in death. "The noble army of martyrs," who sealed their testimony with their blood, receives comparatively few accessions now, for our lot has fallen in happier times; but Christianity has her martyrs still, a noble army of humbler witnesses to the truth, whose noiseless triumphs history does not record, and strangers never know, which yet, more precious than the gold that perisheth, are re-

corded in that book of remembrance which shall one day make known the hidden things of darkness, and bring to light the secret triumphs of faith—showing that it is not only great things that the faith which is founded on the Word of God gives strength to do, that it is not in great emergencies alone that the power of the truth is seen and felt, but in the constant, wasting, wearing struggle of the soul with its hourly trials and temptations, and crosses and losses, and burdens and cares, with the powers of darkness too, and the wiles of the enemy of souls. Yes, there it is, in the secret struggles of the soul, and specially in those last dark hours “when flesh and heart faint and fail,” when light forsakes the closing eyes, and life the drooping head, when weeping friends stand round the dying bed, and can do no more than weep, when not even human sympathy with its healing touch can reach the soul in that deepest solitude of all, when the spirit must leave all human fellowship behind, and even that body which till now has been its home, and pass into the shadowy land alone,—and yet a single passage of Scripture, such as this: “I am the Resurrection and the Life”; or this, “I am He that liveth, and was dead; and behold I am alive for evermore, and have the keys of the unseen world and of death”—a single text like this, remembered in that trying hour, can fill the soul with inward strength to fight the last battle, to slay the last enemy, to gain the last victory, to pass through the last dark night with a song of triumph and of joy—there and then it is that we have the surest evidence that the Word of God “liveth,” as well as “abideth for ever.”

And now, what is the secret of that abiding living power? Here it is: "It is the spirit that quickeneth:" "The words that I speak unto you they are spirit and they are life." In other words it is *because the Scriptures are inspired*. What is the difference between a mummy and a man? The very same difference that there is between Homer and the Bible. From the one the spirit has long fled. In the other it still abides. The Word of God is living and powerful because the spirit of the Lord is ever there. Of Homer, and Virgil, and Dante, and Milton; of Aristotle, and Seneca, and Descartes, and Bacon; of Demosthenes, and Cicero, and Burke, it may be said as was said of one who lived long before them all: "he, being dead, yet speaketh." But of the Author of the Bible and of Him alone it can be said: He, being *alive* yet speaketh. "The mighty God, even the Lord, hath spoken." And speaketh still: "I am He that doth speak; behold it is I." And "let him that hath an ear, hear what the spirit *saith* unto the Churches."

The Spirit of the Lord may bless, and often does bless other books; but He identifies Himself with the Bible, He makes it vocal with His loving voice, and vital with His living power, He breathes through it on the loving soul, and thus communicates the "Life eternal, which was with the Father and is manifested unto us"; and for that reason it is that the work of this Society, namely, the circulation of that living Word in its integrity and purity, is the highest work in which a mortal can engage—a work which an Archangel well might envy.

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